THE TROUBLED MARCOS YEARS

MARCH 3 1986 **KEVIN DOYLE**

https://archive.macleans.ca/article/1986/3/3/the-troubled-marcos-years

COVER

The images are inseparable. He is the frail, sick, stumbling president of a nation of 54 million people. She is his steel-willed, powerful wife and support, a woman of fading beauty and legendary temper. But last weekend, as Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos and his wife, Imelda, faced a ground swell of military and political opposition, the veneer of presidential invincibility was in danger of shattering. More than at any time in his 20-year rule, Marcos was in retreat from opposition forces determined to unseat him. But with characteristic stubbornness the president refused to accept the possibility of defeat. He had canvassed his military field commanders, he said, and they "are all united in expressing their loyalty to the constitution and the president." It was the kind of tenacity and raw ambition that motivated Marcos during his relentless climb to the white-domed Malacañang Palace and the presidency.

From the beginning his career has been scarred by allegations of corruption and hints of scandal. He has been convicted of murder and accused of wide-scale human rights abuses, falsifying his war record and repeatedly fixing elections. But Marcos is also credited with modernizing the economy, bringing a measure of prosperity to some parts of the 7,000-island archipelago and defeating repeated attempts to divide the nation. In the end, however, it was the darker side of the Marcos personality that dominated his presidency.

Murder: The son of a wealthy legislator from llocos Norte province, Marcos decided early to enter politics. To that end, he took a law degree, the traditional preparation for politics in the Philippines. Those who knew him say that he was a good student and an accomplished welterweight boxer. But he wrote his final exams in jail, facing a death sentence after a court found him guilty of murdering his father's chief political opponent. Marcos eventually appealed his conviction to the Supreme Court, defended himself and won a reversal of the verdict on technical grounds.

When the Japanese invaded the Philippines at

Slave: Imelda Marcos became increasingly more powerful, eventually becoming governor of Metro Manila, a member of the national assembly and minister of human settlements and ecology. And she was always her husband's strongest promoter. Describing her role as First Lady, she said: "My role is to be S and S—star and slave. To star so the people have some standard to reach for, and to slave so everybody becomes a star." The Marcoses also became extremely wealthy in office. Their holdings are estimated to be worth at least $1.6 billion. Reportedly, the assets include valuable properties in North America, scattered in big cities from Manhattan to Los Angeles. That wealth is a particularly sensitive issue in a country where poverty is endemic. But in a rare display of the kind of arrogance that helped create the current crisis, Imelda Marcos once said: "Yes the Filipinos are living in slums and hovels. But what counts is the human spirit, and the Filipinos are smiling. They smile because they are a little healthy, a little educated and a little loved. And for me the real index of this country is the smiles of the people, not the economic index."

the start of the Second World War, Marcos says that he joined the guerrillas after his father was executed for resistance activities. But even that claim returned to haunt him. Earlier this year records were discovered in the U.S. government archives in which the U.S. Army described his assertions that he led a guerrilla unit as "fraudulent" and "absurd." The records also indicated— but did not prove conclusively—that Marcos actually collaborated with the Japanese. Said the president: "Don't pay

any attention to these people. They are going crazy."

Marcos's successful z first campaign for the § presidency in 1965 led to z the full emergence of S Imelda as a power in her

own right. As a former Philippine beauty queen, she was once known as the "Rose of Tacloban." She married Marcos, then a dashing congressman, in 1954. In the presidential campaign she arranged his schedule, worked on his speeches— and is blamed for participating in the same corruption and violence that critics accused her husband of generating.

Last weekend millions of Filipinos were still smiling—and cheering. But that was an index of their glee at the growing likelihood that the Marcoses were entering their final days in the palace—and perhaps even in the Philippines.

KEVIN DOYLE with correspondents' reports